[Mary Smith]

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It was about two o'clock in the afternoon and Mary was still busy with her dinner dishes. She asked me to come back to her kitchen, and there I met her oldest daughter, Janie, who was with her mother for a two weeks visit. Mary continued washing dishes while Janie, after rinsing them in a pan of hot water, dried them. The kitchen was clean and orderly and the least disturbing of all the rooms in the house in which to sit. I was glad that Mary after finishing with the dishes did not suggest that we go into another room.

I had been told that Mary was ill and I expected to find her in bed. When I asked her about her health she replied, “Yes, I'm sick with diabetes most of the time but I try to stay up as much as I can. The doctors at Duke are treating me and I go in twice a week when I'm able. They tell me my body is suffering from the brutish treatment I've give it all my life. If they mean work I reckin I have done as much as the next one.” Then Mary told me her story.

Mary Smith was born in Orange County fifty-seven years ago. Her father was a renter and he found it difficult to support his eight children on what was left after the landlord was paid. Not that the children 2 didn't lend a helping hand. Mary cannot remember when she did not contribute her quota of work-hours toward her own support. At isx six she stood up

in a chair to wash the dishes and prepare the scanty meals for cooking while her mother labored in the fields. There were then three smaller children who required the time left over from housekeeping duties. As she grew older there seemed no way to make a little time for school. She thinks that reading must indeed be a great pleasure. Many times she has picked up a book and sat with it in herhands wishing that she might know what was inside its pages.

When she was eleven the family income was supplemented by group participation in a relatively new industry. Smoking tobacco was gaining in popularity and the manufacturers of the product needed many small bags in which to pack it for distribution. The bag factories which grew up in answer to this need sent the bags out by the thousands into the surrounding countryside to be strung and tagged. During periods of slack in farm work Mary and her young brother walked the five miles into Durham and took back to their home two large sacks, each containing ten thousand small bags. She can remember sitting up all night on occasion during the rush season, 3 each member of the family working as hard as he could to string these sacks for which they received thirty cents a thousand. When sleep laid such a heavy claim on her that she felt she could no longer stand it her mother sent her out on the back porch to dash cold water on her face that she might keep her eyes open yet a little longer. The year she was twelve her skill increased so that she raised the family income by several dollars, and her parents out of appreciation of her industry bought her two percale dresses instead of one.

By the time she was fifteen years old her father had decided his family would have a better living at a cotton mill than they could ever make for themselves on another man's farm. They sold the mule and the cow but they kept the twenty-six chickens for a while after moving to town. The nice fresh eggs came in handy because wages weren't so high that such things could be bought in plenty.

Mary began work at twenty-five cents a day. Her hours were from six to six but she will tell you that she doesn't believe the twelve hours then were any harder than eight hours

now what with the speed-up system they have. Her man Jim comes in clean wore out at the end of a day, but of course she knows he's not a young man any longer. In fact, his working days are almost over 4 because he's not so far from sixty and his body is none too stout.

When she married at eighteen she was making four dollars a week and Jim four dollars and a half. If it hadn't been for the installment plan she wonders if they ever could have bought the two beds and stove with which they began housekeeping. Nighttimes Jim made four chairs and a table. With so much furniture in their house they decided to take a couple of boarders to help with the installments still to be paid. The furniture wasn't more than paid for when Mary had to have an operation which cost Jim fifty dollars. That was three momths before her first baby was born and another baby was on its way before the debt was finally paid.

Sometimes when her health was too bad to work in the mill Mary took up her old occupation of stringing bags. The wage had increased to fifty cents a thousand and with steady use of her spare time she could do a thousand a day. In the course of time five children were born to Mary Smith and four of them managed to live past babyhood. Mary's last child was born in 1912. It didn't live but three days and the Smiths had to borrow the money to bury it. “That year was one of the hardest in my life,” Mary told me that afternoon. “The doctor 5 started comin' to see me in early May and there wasn't a day from then on until the middle of September that he didn't come to our house. (As soon as I was out of bed Jim took sick with the typhoid fever and for six solid weeks he wasn't able to work. Two of the younguns took the fever from him. If we couldner got credit we woulder starved. It was many a year before we ever caught up again. We was in such bad shape that the two younguns was forced to go in the mill though I'd hoped to keep 'em out until they'd had a little more chance for schoolin'.”

The oldest boy entered the mill at twelve and the oldest girl at thirteen. The boy has been there since except for sick leaves in the past few years when he has been bothered with

hemorrhages of the lung. He was such a scrawny, pale, little fellow that many a time when Mary went to rouse him on a cold winter morning she felt like turning away from the bed and letting him rest through the day. But she knew he might lose his job, and the money he made was badly needed. Sometimes now she wonders if his health wouldn't have held out better if she could have kept him out of the mill a few years longer until his body had been given more chance to grow.)

This son married after thirty and he has three 6 children, all too young to work, and a wife whose health is so poor she cannot work. He was brought home from the mill with another hemorrhage the other day and Mary is wondering how she can help him. It seems to her that the fourteen dollars a week Jim is making cannot be stretched over another need.

Mary paused at this point in her story and sat with her hands folded in her lap. Janie looked first at her mother and then at me. “If it hadn't been for Mama my younguns wouldner had no clothes atall the past year,” she said. “The mill where my husband works aint give its help but four days' work a week in over a year. Tom makes eleven dollars and its all I can do to feed, let along cloths, my crowd on that. (My children is pretty good about not complainin'. They'll set down one day right after another to dried beans and potatoes without raisin' a row. Of course, that oldest one has got all manner of pride and she caused me a sight of trouble for awhile when she had to wear a old coat to school that never fit her nowhere.) The worst hurt I ever seen her, though, was along 'bout the last of school when her teacher tried to collect rent for the school books she'd been usin' all the year. I thought the State was furnishin' 'em free but they say everybody is supposed to pay rent on 'em. Emma Lee kept after me but I never 7 had the money to give her. One day she broke down in school and cried and told her teacher they wasn't a penny at her home to pay for book rent. The teacher told her to stop worryin' then, and she never bothered her any more. Emma Lee says she's not goin' to stop until she goes clear on through high school.”

Janie's four-year-old child came into the kitchen and propped herself against her grandmother's knee. Mary put her arm about the child and seemed to forget for a while that she was there. “Well, she'll have plenty time to go through high school since the mill can't take 'em until they are sixteen or eighteen, I don't know which,” she said. “Of course it's hard to say if things keep on like they are who's goin' to furnish the money.

“It's been a funny thing about my own family,” she continued. “Pa didn't have a single child that wasn't willin' to work to try to get ahead and they aint a one of us that's got anything today. They aint never been a time when one was havin' trouble that the others was able to help him out of the bog. They's three of us livin' now. One of my brothers whose wife died last year is gettin' just two day's work a week and him with eight children. I don't know how on earth he's livin'. The other brother is makin' $8 a week and 8 he has four children at home.

“This is my pet,” Mary continued, changing the subject abruptly as she drew the child closer to her. “She come over a week before her Ma did and I never heard a whimper out of her.”

“Is she the next to the youngest?” I asked, addressing Janie.

“No'm, there's two younger than her,” Janie answered. “My lap baby is just three months old and the knee baby in yonder room with her is two year old.”

“Six children and her thirty-three,” Mary said.

“That's more children than a working man can take care of” I ventured.

A queer sort of smile flitted across Janie's face and she lowered her head. Presently she looked up at me and said slowly, “You are right about that.”

Before I left, all of Janie's children had been in the kitchen. The oldest girl, twelve, looked pale and undernourished. Two of the younger ones played about with a great deal of energy. They would be considered pretty in any average group of children and as I looked across at Janie I wondered how it could be. At thirty-three she is fat, sallow, and unkempt with a look of forty-five at its worst about her face and figure. Good-naturedly she watches her children at 9 play and thinks no further than the next feeding of her small baby. Mary, clean and not unattractive, smiles with patient affection at her daughter and her grandchildren. She has a capacity for thinking ahead that Janie seems not to have.

Mary looks back over her past life and can see in it no period in which she might have saved for the days that are ahead. She will tell you that she has on occasion spent a little money for foolish pleasure but she wonders if a person could stand all the ups and downs of life without giving over now and then to foolish things. Occupying a prominent position on her mantel in the front room is a rose-colored goddess edged in green, propping itself against a green scooped-out tray which serves miscellaneous uses. She bought it for herself at the fair about ten years ago and she's still proud of it. In no less conspicuous places in her front room are framed pictures of the Rock of Ages; Jesus, the Savior; and a bordered motto of her missionary society. A good many of her extra quarters have gone through the channel of the church to help the heathen in foreign lands to a better way of life.

She faces sixty with assets spent and liabilities yet to be reckoned with. Her chief asset in life has been her capacity for labor and from that, the one 10 material asset she has saved for herself is something like two hundred dollars worth of furniture. The mill can no longer use her and she knows that Jim's days of usefulness are numbered. There has been talk on the hill in recent months about old age benefits. All that Mary understands out of that talk is that when Jim is sixty-five he will begin to draw a little money. She says it isn't reasonable the amount will be enough to keep them both. Actually Jim will draw with interest the 1 1/2% of his wage saved for him and matched by his employer during his

work years beginning with 1936. If his fast-failing health will permit him to serve the mill for two more years he will consider that nothing but luck is carrying him on. He will be sixty-one then with only four more years to go before he starts collecting his old age benefits which with care would last him about six months.

Just before I left Mary's house she looked out of her kitchen window and across the hill. For awhile no one spoke and the hum of the mill was the only sound to be heard in the room. When Mary began to talk it was as if she thought that Janie and I, too, must have been thinking with her on the growth of the mill. “Yonder mill want one-tenth the size it is now when I first come here forty-two year ago,” she said. “It 11 seems like me and Jim's got old with the mill but age aint hurt the mill none. When it slows down it can git new parts and we caint. What's worse we soon aint goin' to have money to buy rations for feeding our wore-out bodies. The mill keeps makin' money but it has to give to them that's young and strong, I reckon, and even to them it caint give a regular livin'.”

Mary would like to have a little place of her own on the edge of town where she might raise a garden, and small patches, along with chickens, hogs and a cow — especially a cow. She knows the country can be hard, bitter hard, because she hasn't forgotten when she was six years old. But then she was working for the other fellow and she believes it would be different if the land and house were hers. Nobody knows better than Mary that such thoughts are but an idle dream. She says that all her life she has known nothing but half-living and she expects no miracle when her days of usefulness are behind her. She does wonder sometimes what kind of a life lies before her children and grandchildren.